United Nations A/HRC/28/NGO/102

General Assembly

Distr.: General
24 February 2015

English only

Human Rights Council
Twenty-eighth session
Agenda item 3
Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by the Servas International, a non-governmental organization on the roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[16 February 2015]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

GE.15-03450 (E)
1503450

Please recycle

Overcoming hate and intolerance

The adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948 at the Palais de Chaillot, Paris, arose directly from the experience of the Second World War. There was a broad consensus within the international community that the atrocities committed should never be allowed to happen again and that "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."

Nevertheless at the beginning of 2015 it seems that we couldn't be further away from this ideal. With Middle East being in turmoil, extremism and fundamentalism being on the rise and hate crimes committed in the name of religion the first months of the year have seen a dramatic polarization on all sides along with a serious degradation of international relations.

One of the sad highlights in 2015 were certainly the tragic attacks on Charlie Hebdo and a kosher supermarket in Paris, which intensified an already divisive debate over integration and immigration in a country long seen as an oasis of peace and freedom, despite the calls for moderation also by the families of the victims.

Shortly after the attacks the High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein therefore stated: "If this attack is allowed to feed discrimination and prejudice, it will be playing straight into the hands of extremists whose clear aim is to divide religions and societies. With xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiments already on the rise in Europe, I am very concerned that this awful, calculated act will be exploited by extremists of all sorts."

His words were sadly proven right when in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks a tragic series of attacks against French mosques took place and added to the fear of retaliation. According to the Central Council of Muslims in France more than 50 anti-Muslim incidents, including attacks on mosques, have been recorded since the Paris shootings.

The escalation following the Charlie Hebdo attacks was a dangerous continuation of a trend that had begun far before. Already between 2012 and October 2014 around 81 attacks targeting mosques were carried out in Germany, thereof 12 in 2014. This trend was similar in other countries of Europe. According to research by Ineke van der Valk more than one-third of the Netherlands' 475 mosques have experienced at least one incident of vandalism, threatening letters, attempted arson, the placement of pigs' heads, or other aggressive actions between 2004 and 2014.

At the same time also attacks against synagogues took place, such as in June 2014, in Germany and in Paris. A 2012 survey by the EU's Fundamental Rights agency of some 6,000 Jews in eight European countries found that 66% of respondents felt anti-Semitism in Europe was on the rise and 76% said anti-Semitism had increased in their country over the past five years. In the 12 months after the survey, nearly half said they worried about being verbally insulted or attacked in public because they were Jewish.[1]

Growing radicalization, fundamentalism and extremism demand a renewed emphasis of Mahatma Gandhi's ideals – both spiritual and political, as UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said on 11 January 2015, pledging the ongoing commitment of the United Nations to promote tolerance, and ensure justice and dignity for all. "Divisive politics and sectarian incitement have no place in our modern world. As Gandhi reminded us, 'There will be no lasting peace on earth unless we learn not merely to tolerate but even to respect the other faiths as our own'", said Ban. He also stressed that 2015 must be a year for global action. "We must change course if we are to avoid even greater damage to ourselves and to our planet," said Ban, explaining that like the gathered leaders, he too must emphasize the importance of his mandate, and, as UN Secretary-General, he must spotlight 2015 as "most important and crucial for humanity."[2]

[1] http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/aug/07/antisemitism-rise-europe-worst-since-nazis

[2] http://human-wrongs-watch.net/2015/01/12/growing-radicalization-fundamentalism-and-extremism-demand-renewed-emphasis-of-mahatma-gandhis-ideals/

As an organization working actively for peace since 1949 Servas International remains especially concerned about the consequences the growing divide and hate crimes may have on our societies. Servas is convinced that only the personal encounter with the other and the interaction between human beings play an essential role in overcoming cultural barriers, increasing tolerance and connecting people. Terrible actions like the Charlie Hebdo attacks and related violence therefore should not make us lose perspective of our fundamental ideals. To the contrary, in the aftermath of such atrocities, there is a further need to encourage and enable the development of increased tolerance and mutual understanding between people around the world.

Servas is an international, non-profit, non-governmental federation of national Servas groups, encompassing an international network of hosts and travelers. The purpose of the network is to help build world peace, goodwill and understanding by providing opportunities for personal contacts among people of different cultures, backgrounds and nationalities. Servas is convinced that such an exchange can contribute to the improvement of social cohesion and achieve a more just and peaceful society, setting up a linkage of people at grassroots level.

Education is another of the key factors to a better understanding of cultures. This kind of education can be provided in different ways, such as formal and informal education. To this end Servas International has created a volunteer program called the Servas Youth Language Exchange (SYLE), building upon the original concept of Servas founders in 1949, calling themselves "peace builders", which was "work-study-travel" . This program aims to develop awareness while staying for a specific time in a foreign country and working there in a local NGO.

Strengthening trust beyond differences, supporting solidarity and friendship through volunteers, can effectively contribute to eliminate racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, as held in the Durban Declaration, 2001: "Cultural diversity is a cherished asset for the advancement and welfare of humanity at large and should be valued, enjoyed, genuinely accepted and embraced as a permanent feature which enriches our societies."
Servas International, as an organization, will therefore pursue its peace mission by facilitating the coming together of hosts and travelers of any race, creed, sexual orientation, class/caste or nationality. It will continue to work on overcoming barriers, bring people together and in the most practical way apply the words of the High Commissioner for Human Rights when he concluded "We must speak of the need to love more, to care more, be compassionate more and kind, to include more and be included more, and if we are to derive anything from the vicious murders that took the lives of the people we mourn today – it is that lesson."